

In Defense of Internment

A Review

[David Wilson](#)

In Defense of Internment: The Case for 'Racial Profiling' in World War Two and the War on Terror, by Michelle Malkin. Regnery, Washington, DC, 2004. 376pp.

Michelle Malkin is a conservative columnist and blogger who, since 9-11, has become a strident advocate of enhanced scrutiny of foreigners in the United States, particularly those of Muslim background. She has also advocated stringent measures against illegal aliens of all kinds, a repudiation of American citizenship by birth (the phenomenon of so-called "Anchor babies"), and, most notoriously, the racial profiling of Muslims in the United States, regardless of their citizenship status. There is a certain irony to her red meat xenophobia: she herself is the "Anchor baby" of Filipinos who were in the US on student visas when she was born, and her husband is an American Jew.

According to her introduction, while pursuing her *jihad* to racially profile Muslims, she found her opponents constantly pushing back by referencing the Japanese Internment of World War Two. Hence, she makes it clear that she wrote this book primarily to knock that argument out of her opponents' hands: in the process, she has produced a legitimate, not to say high quality, revisionist history, and has also provided some useful points of comparison with other, more controversial, aspects of World War Two revisionism.

The story of the Japanese Internment is fairly well known. Following President Franklin Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 of February 19, 1942, some 120,000 Japanese nationals and Japanese Americans were forced to leave their homes on the West Coast and were re-settled in various concentration camps in Wyoming, Utah, Arizona and the deep interior of California. Although Japanese and Japanese Americans were theoretically allowed to settle freely beyond the Sierra Nevada and Cascade mountain ranges, the fact is that the urgency of the implementation of EO 9066 meant that many of the deportees were forced to sell their homes, farms, and businesses in short order, and at tremendous economic loss, and were then loaded onto trains and sent to such camps as Manzanar, Heart Mountain, Tule Lake, and several others. Young Japanese who could attend college in the interior of the country were allowed to do so, young Japanese men were conscripted into the armed forces and distinguished themselves by their heroism, but, in the main, over a hundred thousand Japanese and Japanese Americans spent on the average of two to three years in the drab barracks of the internment camps, behind barbed wire.



Japanese civilians were uprooted and delivered by train cars to American internment camps. April 5, 1942. This is a work of the United States Department of the Interior and is in the public domain.

Malkin's basic thesis is that the Internment of the Japanese was "justifiable". True, this is a moral, rather than a historical, judgment, and as such is weak. A better way to frame her thesis would be to say that the internment of the Japanese was, at least primarily, the result of legitimate national security issues, i.e., that Japanese and Japanese Americans constituted a real threat to the United States during the Second World War. As such her thesis is revisionist in the basic sense, since the typical interpretation is that the confinement of Japanese Americans in concentration camps was primarily due to anti-Japanese racism and general war hysteria rather than national security concerns.

To support her thesis Malkin makes extensive use of materials that have been developed in recent years from "Magic", which was the program that deciphered Japanese codes throughout the war, and even before; indeed her book provides many pages of "Magic" decodes. The substance of these materials is meant to show that, among other things, the Imperial Japanese Navy planned, and sought, to play on the loyalties of Japanese and Japanese Americans to recruit spies. Unfortunately, the materials presented in the book, while interesting and valuable as primary source material, really do nothing to describe any significant Japanese espionage in the United States, and, moreover, there were no successful prosecutions during or after the war.

Malkin, however, uses the Magic decodes as such to argue for the necessity of the deportations, claiming that Roosevelt's awareness of the decodes persuaded him to promote the internment. She also uses ignorance of the Magic decodes to explain away the impressive number of highly placed officials who objected to the internment overall: including J. Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI, and Attorney General Francis Biddle, who would go on to be the lead American judge at the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg.

When describing the actual process of rounding up and incarcerating 120,000 human beings in camps, or when describing their lives in the camps, Malkin predictably glosses over the downsides. If the Japanese were kept in stables, she reminds the reader that those same stables would later house GI's. She breathlessly describes the amenities of camp life: apparently, the women were allowed to get their hair done, there were lots of books to read, and, indeed, some internees in one camp wanted the barbed wire fence to be higher! (The reason for this was that the internees were afraid of mobs attempting access to the camps, which points to racism and war hysteria, but Malkin just walks on by.) At one point, she even launches into a detailed description of the delightful menus that were offered the internees: Lamb roast with gravy, potatoes, green beans, fresh pears, bread and coffee.

There are other defects. Malkin goes out of her way to downplay the existence both of anti-Asian and anti-Japanese prejudice as well as the existence of war hysteria, omitting the long history of anti-Asian, and specifically anti-Japanese sentiment. For example, she makes much of the fact that about one-third of the deportees were not American citizens. Yet she omits the fact that this was largely because of the 1924 Exclusion Act, which specifically targeted Japanese nationals and sought to prevent them gaining citizenship. (The Japanese Americans, who comprised two thirds of the total, were the second generation, or "Nisei", and were American by birth.)

In the end, Malkin is not really successful in proving her thesis, however it is framed: there is no convincing evidence that the national security threat posed by Japanese Americans was a sufficient reason for the draconian nature of the deportations. What her book does present, however much she may wish to downplay it, is a situation in which war hysteria, fueled by Pearl Harbor and a hatred of non-Whites and specifically Japanese, led to a situation in which local and federal governments approved the deportations as a way of maintaining public order. In plain English, the Japanese were interned to placate a potentially angry mob.

More interesting than her argument is the reaction her book received, as a form of historical revisionism, as well as how it ties into the much more notorious internment policies of Nazi Germany.

Upon its release, the Japanese American Citizens League condemned the book as "a desperate attempt to impugn the loyalty of Japanese Americans during World War II to justify harsher governmental policies today in the treatment of Arab and Muslim Americans": Harsh words, but also a fair summary of the book's contents. An *ad hoc* group of academics, the "Historians' Committee for Fairness" also criticized the book, claiming that "In Defense of Internment" represented "a blatant violation of professional standards of objectivity and fairness," which is a fairly pointless criticism, in that Malkin is not a professional historian and makes no claims in that direction. However, it is more interesting that Malkin, in writing a book that hurt the feelings of a distinct minority, and sought to justify the maltreatment of that minority, was not subjected to any further sanctions.

Naturally, part of the crosstalk when the book was released led into the validity of comparisons with the concentration camp systems in Europe, principally in Nazi Germany. And we should say straight off that such comparisons are totally inappropriate in terms of the results: the death rate among the Japanese internees was on the order of 1.5%, the vast majority of these being "natural" deaths, while births over deaths continued at a rate of about 3.5:1. This has to be contrasted to a situation in which hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives in the Nazi German camp system, to say nothing of the depredations of Nazism further on in Eastern Europe.

Yet a comparison and contrast of the two concentration camp systems does shed light on some factors that might help explain how these imprisonments came about. For example, economic competition between white and Japanese farmers appears to have played a large part in anti-Japanese prejudice, particularly in Central California. In the same way, Jewish dominance in many areas of post-Imperial Weimar Germany had a lot to do with making Anti-Semitism a popular ideology in Germany.

There is little indication that German Jews, or other Jews, were incarcerated to protect them from mob violence: such mob violence as occurred in Germany, as in *Kristallnacht*, appears to have been choreographed by government officials. This has to be contrasted to the several references to potential lynchings and vigilantism that helped spawn the Japanese internment. On the other hand, there is evidence, and especially pertinent to the deportation of the Hungarian Jews, that the evacuation of Jewish populations was done not only to further a racist agenda but also due to national security and military concerns, since it was assumed throughout the Nazi hierarchy that Jews would betray the war effort “just because they were Jews.”

It is precisely on this point, the idea of intrinsic evil based on ethnicity, that one finds a strong point of contact not only with the Nazi agenda towards Jews but also the American agenda against its Japanese residents. For example, the Niihau incident in early December 1941, in which a Japanese pilot landed his plane on a small Hawaiian island and received succor from three resident Japanese Americans, was widely ballyhooed at the time and taken as evidence of the susceptibility of Japanese Americans to treason, at least by the advocates of internment.

For example, General John DeWitt, widely considered one of the main architects of the Internment, was quoted in congressional testimony as follows:

“I don't want any of them [persons of Japanese ancestry] here. They are a dangerous element. There is no way to determine their loyalty... It makes no difference whether he is an American citizen, he is still a Japanese. American citizenship does not necessarily determine loyalty... But we must worry about the Japanese all the time until he is wiped off the map.”

There were even racial criteria involved, 1/16 of Japanese blood was sufficient to make the bearer subject to deportation, a criterion – this would mean one great great grandparent of Japanese ancestry – many times more stringent than even the Nuremberg Laws, and hearkening back instead to the hysterical racism of “one drop of blood” laws of the *ante bellum* South.

Meanwhile, for further context, the *Los Angeles Times* channeled *Der Stuermer*:

“A viper is nonetheless a viper whenever the egg is hatched - so a Japanese American, born of Japanese parents - grows up to be a Japanese, not an American.”

Malkin scarcely addresses any of these issues – none of the above quotes come from her book – and instead seeks to argue around them. For example, she points out that German and Italian nationals were also incarcerated in some cases, so racism could not have been a factor. She further argues that it would not have been possible to incarcerate all Americans of German or Italian descent, which, she claims, was originally envisioned, since that would have required the imprisonment of approximately 38% of the American population. She also uses the argument of magnitude to explain away the fact that the Japanese American population of Hawaii was not relocated or locked up: there were just too many of them. The lesson appears to be that, in war, one can in fact persecute and deport a given minority, providing they are small and sufficiently outnumbered. However, selective application of racial criteria

for national security purposes weakens the national security argument as such, and all that remains is war hysteria, racism, and the economic self-interest of those who profited from the deportations.

In Defense of Internment has some strengths. Malkin is a fine writer, when she describes such things as the Niihau Incident she writes with vigor and color. On the other hand, she also has a tendency for arch overstatement, typical of her blogs and newspaper columns, when describing the overall nature of the internment, the war on terror, and in her endless references to the “political correctness” that prevents her views from being more widely accepted.

She also deserves credit for using the Magic decrypts and other materials associated with Japanese espionage in the United States. This material is interesting and its dissemination makes a solid contribution. On the other hand, as we have already discussed, none of this material really helps her argument that the internment was driven by legitimate strategic considerations.

In Defense of Internment meets the general requirements of historical revisionism in that it seeks to revise our understanding and reassess our judgments about past events, and, in addition, because it employs source material that has only recently come to light and has been little used in other works. On the other hand, her book is also a reminder that revisionism is no guarantee of either greater fairness or value than the lazy prevailing wisdom.

The best way to understand Malkin’s book is to follow the subtitle, not the title, for the underlying argument throughout the book is that the United States government, in time of war, can, and should, abridge civil liberties for the sake of the safety of its citizens, with the rather large caveat that citizens who belong to the target group *du jour* will be excluded from such protections. Certainly, in the wake of 9-11, and the beginning of an undeclared and therefore potentially endless war, we have seen significant enlargement of federal powers, including extensive wiretapping and email snooping, an effective suspension of *habeas corpus*, and the implementation of a torture regime against suspected terrorists. We would expect Malkin, channeling Orwell, to applaud the way these big rough men protect her while she sleeps in her bed. On the other hand, this enlargement of federal powers must be alarming to anyone who, looking across the expanse of 20th Century history, concludes that such growth is inimical to the sanctity of individual freedom.

Author(s):	David Wilson
Title:	In Defense of Internment
Sources:	<i>Inconvenient History</i> , vol. 1, no. 1 (summer 2009)
Dates:	published: 2009-08-01, first posted: 2012-09-26 00:00:00

<https://inconvenienthistory.com/1/1/1902>